



Jabberwocky

David Beagley, editor

Lost and Found: Thoughts on Childhood, Identity and Story

Shaun Tan

Shaun Tan is an artist and writer whose distinctive voice through his books and multimedia has resounded worldwide. In 2011 alone, Shaun was awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award for children's literature from the Swedish government, the Hugo Award for best professional illustrator from the World Science Fiction Society (for the second year running), and the Academy Award (Oscar) for short film (animation) from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for "The Lost Thing", which also won the Australian Film Institute Award for animation.



*Shaun was born in Fremantle, Western Australia, in 1974 and his first published illustration appeared in the Australian speculative and science fiction magazine **Aurealis** in 1990. In 1995 he received the Australian Children's Book Council's Crichton Award for new illustrator and has been regularly awarded each year since, throughout the world, for his work as both artist and author.*

*His interest in multimedia forms has seen three of his books - **The Red Tree**, **The Arrival**, and **The Lost Thing** - adapted as stage plays and as musical performances, in addition to **The Lost Thing's** successes as an animated film.*

*In September 2011, Shaun presented the **Sir John Quick Memorial Lecture** for La Trobe University in Bendigo, Australia. This annual public lecture commemorates Sir John Quick, a lawyer, politician and author, who was a principal contributor to the formation of Australia as an independent nation and to the writing of its constitution, and presents major public figures in social expression and contribution. Former speakers have included Sir Ninian Stephen, former Australian Governor-General, Mike Moore, former Prime Minister of New Zealand and Director-General of the WTO, and Dr David Suzuki, environmental scientist.*

Shaun's lecture drew on his acceptance speech for the Astrid Lindgren Award, and included very honest and revealing musings on art, his life, and fame, and how the imagination of children through literature is so important.



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The text printed here is drawn largely from the working notes provided by Shaun, with inclusions from an audio recording of the actual speech



I wanted to talk a little about my adventures this year, and also mostly about my childhood. I think with a lot of my work, if you want to know everything about it, just read the books. So, what can I contribute? Probably just telling you a little about my background and the special features behind each book.

2011 has been a very busy and strange year: while I had planned on spending a good amount of time at home this year, pottering around quietly and getting on with a new picture book project, that was not the case. The interruptions – and not necessarily unwelcome interruptions – began in January with an Oscar nomination, leading to a surprise win in February, and then a mad circuit of publicity on behalf of our small animation crew; one of those rare occasions where the mainstream suddenly becomes interested in animation and illustration, albeit very briefly.

I had the chance to experience first hand the myth of celebrity: you remain your usually daggy self, the work stays exactly the same too. Nothing actually changes, but the expectations of strangers suddenly runs ahead of reality. Of course, friends and family – and those in the world of children's book – still know you are a decidedly unglamorous nerd, which is half the fun. As I hinted at in my strictly enforced 45-second Oscar acceptance speech, it's a wonderful irony that a story about a creature that everyone ignores, produced by a struggling four-person studio above a suburban laundromat, happens to be the centre of attention. We certainly didn't set out to win such a big prize, even though we often joked about it in the studio – 'It'll all be fine when we win an Oscar, ha ha.' We weren't even afraid to jinx it, the idea seemed so improbable.

The film is a good way to introduce my work because, in a way, my work is semi-autobiographical, as is most artists' work. As Socrates says, the painter always paints himself. Even if you try not to, you are essentially doing a self-portrait. I think *The Lost Thing* is a good story that way, because it is so weird and bizarre, even to me, that when I look at it now, I don't entirely understand it, what it is about. But I do recognize that all the main characters are actually versions of myself, especially the narrator.

You may notice that the main character does look like me ... a little bit ... especially as I did as a teenager, where the equivalent of staying in my room and drawing all the time is represented as a character whose obsession is collecting bottle tops – some kind of very focussed, nerdy activity. And then he stumbles across some unusual experience which leads him to a kind of ambiguous revelation, which I think is a good metaphor for a lot of what I do and try to do.



Of course, the best outcome of this whole Oscar thing was simple recognition that good work comes from simple dedication to original ideas, and does not require a huge studio, opinion polling or anything more than modest labour. *The Lost Thing* began life as a small, idiosyncratic book from an independent publisher, and hopefully this draws some attention back the wealth of brilliant storytelling in picture books, and writing for young people in general: well-crafted ideas that grow slowly in tiny unseen rooms, then shared generously and unpretentiously with anyone, of any age, who might be interested.

This was something also reinforced by the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, or ALMA, an international prize honouring a particular author, illustrator, educator or organisation each year. You may recall that Sonya Hartnett received this in 2008 and, although I had been nominated twice, I did not consider myself in the running. So much so that I was oblivious to the announcement timing, and it took me a while to figure out who was calling me while washing the dishes one evening. My initial thought on answering the phone was, 'please don't try to sell me something', and you can actually hear my cagey apprehension in a recording of that phone call – subsequently played at the Bologna Book Fair announcement, much to my horror. Well, after a while I understood the significance of this call from the blue – arguably far more important than an Academy Award, and even more surprising. It involves a deep critical review of the entire body of an individual's works by a jury of 12 specialists, measured against 160 nominees from around the world, many of whom actually inspired me as a young artist.



I don't feel it's necessarily such an individual accolade, though. My own impression, especially after travelling to Stockholm for a week of lectures, workshops and visits to various cultural institutions related to children's literature, was a feeling of deep connection with a vast community of like-minded creators. That's the wonderful thing about the children's literature community, a feeling of universal beliefs in the primacy of story, especially as a means of stimulating the imagination and opening minds, beginning at an early age, when there is an inherent appetite for this.

By focusing on an individual, the ALMA is really channeling broader attention to the commitment and passion of all writers, illustrators and the organizations that support a shared aspiration: the notion that literature for young people enriches the culture around it, enlightens and educates. And that it also unashamedly entertains: that our love for children's books is, in and of itself, deserving of an honourable mention. There are many bad things in our world, a place of ambivalence, doubt and conflict, but here at least is one thing that we can all agree is unequivocally positive: good books for young readers.

To know that my own fairly odd, idiosyncratic vision can be so accepted into this sphere is a good feeling. It dissolves any sense of isolation or self-indulgent rambling, which of course is always a big risk for any creative person.

When I'm alone and working in the middle of the night, as if marooned on an island, I'm always worrying whether my work will be strong enough to float, like a message in a bottle, and able to travel any distance at all from my desk. Can other people make sense of my own strange obsessions, these words and images that I find so inexplicably fascinating? Can a story move beyond my own private imagination, pass across oceans of language and culture, be understood by adults and children alike, perhaps even those living in distant places I have never visited?

These are the thoughts that every writer and artist must ponder occasionally, if not all the time. It boils down to a singular question, one that draws all of us to this wonderful, rambling world of literature, and one that runs so parallel to ordinary life: 'do others think and feel the same things that I think and feel?'

Well, standing here before you today, I can only guess that you probably do! Which is really quite amazing, this strange, connective power of writing and illustration - I still don't get how it works, I only know that it does! To be presenting lectures like this always seems very far removed from the quiet confinement of my studio in Brunswick, and previously suburban Perth, insulated by books, art materials and silence, where every thought happens in a merciful solitude, far from scrutiny. I'm an introverted person and not especially confident. My mind is a jumble of vague thoughts that I'm constantly sifting for grains of reliable truth, things that seem honest and real amid a lot of other noise.

Drawing and writing have always been helpful here. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, my scribbling coalesces into an interesting painting or story. Occasionally these are published and they become suddenly public, when they might be received with a frown, a laugh, or a quiet nod of assent, as if to say 'Yes, I see and feel something like that too.' Joy, sorrow, fear, pleasure, and every shade of mystery in between.

So drawing is essentially a way of thinking and talking, which became particularly important for me as a young person, trying to figure out my place in the world.

To explain a little of my background, I grew up in the coastal suburb of Hillarys, which is now a place of shopping malls, highways and tourist beaches, surrounded by a brick and tile mosaic of freshly minted suburban houses, bleeding into the ocean with an enormous marina. In my childhood, however, Hillarys was a somewhat empty and anonymous place, a peripheral suburb in a peripheral city, like a cartographer's afterthought, something to fill the space between a map and the edge of the world. A few houses, a BIG W, Woolworths and Hungry Jack's, bush and a desert-like beach - a kind of suburban fishbowl, to which I had various affections and aversions.

I have very mixed feelings about my homeland: a landscape of affordable blocks carved from ancient sand dunes and forests by big yellow bulldozers; neat, level squares of opportunity left baking in the fierce heat of summer, waiting for young middle-class families to fill them with dreams of peace and prosperity. We were one such family: my parents, my older brother and me. My father is Malaysian Chinese, his parents from China. My mother is a third generation Australian of English and Irish ancestry.



My own name includes all of these elements: an Irish first name with an English spelling – Shaun – followed by a Malaysian version of a Chinese surname – Tan.



Many people naturally ask me how this mixed heritage has influenced the themes of my work as an artist, particularly as I often deal with subjects such as immigration, cultural difference and problems of language. Of course, a book like *The Arrival*, a wordless story of a man traveling to an imaginary country, was initially inspired by anecdotes from my own family, including the experiences of my wife who is from Finland. All of my family actually appear as characters in my book, not that it's important for the story, but it's nice to know.

I drew myself as the main protagonist in *The Arrival*, and although I've never left my home country, I still have a sense of being a little displaced. In fact, many of us are 'displaced people' if we look back far enough. The history of humanity is a history of migration, change and adaptation.

Growing up in Perth only seemed to make this more obvious. I often wondered about my family's spiritual relationship, if such a thing existed, to this semi-arid patch of coast. Being half-Chinese in a very Anglo-Australian neighbourhood may have compounded

this; I was constantly aware of looking different, of not entirely fitting in, perhaps even more so than most children, very sensitive to occasional anti-Asian racism directed at my brother, my father and me, something that used to especially enrage my mother. There was a sense of both belonging and not belonging; it's a strange thing to be constantly asked "Where are you from?" in the place you were born. Over time I began to realise that a clear identity or connection to a place is perhaps not something natural or innate. Sometimes you have to invent it, much like writing a good story or drawing a picture.

My parents set a good example by designing and building their own house, a process which lasted much of my early childhood; the smell of wet cement and angle grinders, lifted on the breeze from the Indian Ocean, still conjure vivid memories of a building-site playground. They were growing something out of nearly nothing, brick by brick, far from their own parents, and far from the source of their own culture. Europe and Asia were utterly abstract concepts for us kids, just words and pictures in books and on TV, just a less inventive kind of fiction, but barely anything more real than that.

The only signs that any previous empire existed were huge, wild-looking insects and woolly caterpillars that visited our new place from the dark frontier of surrounding bush-land, objects of endless fascination and delight for us boys, as they were technically our first pets. These disappeared over time, along with the bush, and the huge orange-and-white banksia flowers you could hold with two hands, like giant hand-knitted fruits. It was illegal to pick these native blossoms, so we rarely braved it. Then one day all the banksia trees were cut down and burnt to make room for new houses: the nearby hillside glowed red in the night, we walked past the smouldering wreckage for weeks, kicking up plumes of ash on our way home from school. This was but one example of the strange, confusing world of adults, with their arbitrary rules of protection and destruction.

In many ways Hillarys, like most outer suburbs, is a microcosm of Australia as a whole, a land of displaced lives, of worlds both imported, transplanted and re-built from scratch. At the same time, Australia is a country with a troubled conscience. It's still coming to terms with a dark history: the unjust theft of land from its indigenous people, and the decimation of a fragile environment by two centuries of European agriculture and industry. Australia boasts the dubious title of having the highest rate of species extinction in the world, among other ongoing environmental disasters, surrounded by a culture of denial and temporary measures.

This background inevitably finds its way into my illustrations in *The Rabbits*, a fable about strange creatures who destroy a country that is not their own; and a collection of short stories, *Tales from Outer Suburbia* – an ode to my homeland – where silent creatures haunt the streets like guilty shadows, and giant machines roll through quiet, dormitory neighborhoods, among so many other things that are never fully understood.



Here are the strange antipodean suburbs that I've grown to simultaneously love and distrust, to celebrate and criticise. Above all else, I'm fascinated by the ambiguity of it all. Not so much a moral ambiguity, but something even more fundamental, a conceptual weirdness. It's a landscape that has changed faster than it can think or remember, a post-industrial science fiction story that, like much of the modern world, is still being written.

I think children understand the ambiguity of everyday reality better than anyone. They are very sensitive to it, seeing it all fresh and for the first time, in all its strangeness. Children are still trying to figure out the inconsistencies that many adults have filed in the deeper recesses of our minds and hearts, locked up in a subconscious cabinet, being too busy dealing with more pressing, practical problems. How many of us as children noticed something baffling, and launched into an endless line of questioning, one "Why?" following another, until a weary parent says "I don't know" or "That's just how it is" or "Stop asking so many silly questions!"

For example, imagine an enormous red creature discovered on the shore of a city, which everyone sees, but nobody pays attention to. Covered with hinged doors, sporting claws, bells and tentacles without any apparent purpose, it takes a younger person to be curious enough to raise a question that nobody dare ask, "Where does it belong?" The answer is likely to be far too complicated, the implications too challenging: an unwelcome disruption to day-to-day business. In this particular story, that question is never fully answered, but perhaps that's the point of fiction. Answers are always not so important, at least not as important as good questions, addressing problems that will always be a part of life.

The title of this story, *The Lost Thing*, might refer to either the strange creature we see in the illustrations, or something more abstract in the heart of the narrator, his own imagination or soul. Once again, I've represented myself as the central character, because in some ways it's an autobiographical story. It was the first picture book I both wrote and illustrated, at the age of 25, a time when I was accepting more adult responsibilities, worrying about making a living as an artist, and feeling some nostalgia for the curiosity, playfulness and sideways wisdom of my childhood.

The story is essentially self-critical – a warning against my own complacency, my tendency to ignore the things that are most important. My counterpart in the story laments that he doesn't notice 'lost things' anymore because he's 'too busy doing other stuff', which really has a lot to do with my own preoccupations, often quite self-centered and short-sighted. The narrator recedes into the darkness, lost among the commuters on their way home from work.

Such an act of criticism, even with a bleak ending, is inherently optimistic. Such stories open the possibility of grafting childhood curiosity back into an adult consciousness, as much as it encourages young readers to hold on to those things that fascinate them, and never let them go. Things in darkness are pushed back into the light.

Indeed, writing and drawing in a sketchbook is quite therapeutic for me; there's a feeling of wholeness that comes from rummaging through all the disjointed rooms of my childhood, youth and adulthood, looking for ideas, a mix of dreaming and remembering. Drawing for me is a single continuous project that's been in progress since I could first hold a crayon.

Today, lines and words dangle on the pages of my sketchbooks, the tip of a pencil able to hook submerged memories and impressions from very long ago, things which are otherwise inaccessible to the more conscious, purposeful parts of my mind. I try not to worry about what my drawings actually mean, I just follow them where they go. Meaning, significance, good sense, order, logic, appropriateness: all such things can be indefinitely postponed when I draw – which is a huge relief!

After years of academic study and practical training, I've come full circle in respecting the intuitions of childhood. For all its awkwardness, there is something utterly sincere and profound about that early creative impulse, a natural animal instinct. Some of the most beautiful paintings in the world are not found in the secular temple of an art gallery, but pinned by magnets to that other sacred site, the fridge door. Here you will see the purest acts of casual expression, true artists immersed in act of making, free of self-consciousness or pretension (and, mercifully, also free of art dealers and critics!)

A child's imagination is a laboratory where anything goes; an endless thread of 'what if?' conjectures, constantly tested against reality for some kind of fit. Assumptions are derailed and common sense disobeyed. In other words, a child's imagination has all the virtues that one is chasing as an adult artist. "Every child is an artist," wrote Picasso, "the problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up."



I've been very fortunate to find myself stumbling into the world of children's books as a freelance illustrator and, therefore, in a creative environment where children are present to remind me how to look and see. It's a mistake to believe that childhood is just a series of educational stepping stones, something to be experienced and left behind as we graduate into adulthood. It's more like a bag of things you take on a long journey, always being careful not to forget where you put them.

My own fondest memories of childhood all involve making something, as my parents did, out of nearly nothing. My mother, an amateur artist, once meticulously copied a scene from Disney's *The Jungle Book* onto a bedroom wall using a palette of acrylic colours she kept in jam jars. I was three years old and remember seeing this enormous, grinning snake appear, bit by bit: an early introduction to the magic of art. Along with other kids I soon discovered that we too could transform cheap runny paints and butcher's paper into birds, elephants, dinosaurs and erupting volcanoes, as present in our minds as anything outside of them.

I suppose this is one of the positive things about growing up where I did: a feeling of undefined possibility, of living in a wide open space without apparent history or expectation. My childhood felt like an unmeasured century that needed to be filled by small creative acts, if only to keep boredom at bay. Drawing a flower and putting cheap perfume in the middle of it; building primeval figures out of clay and sticks, making planets from paper and glue wrapped around an inflated balloon. (I remember once trying to capture sunlight in a picture by putting a layer of Sellotape over a ring of cardboard. Just as the yellow bulldozers constantly erased the landscape of our suburb to a bed of pale sand, kindergarten easels were set up every day like a row of *tabula rasa*, blank slates, inviting tiny hands to conjure something new into existence, to fill the emptiness.

One of my first drawings features two birds watching an egg in a nest, waiting for it to hatch. This still hangs in my parent's bedroom not far from another thing I drew at the age of five: a dinosaur father and dinosaur mother, with an unborn infant curled up in her belly.

It's interesting now to look at them, and see recurring themes of genesis and birth, something very young children are naturally interested in, given that from their point of view the universe has not been around for very long. It's interesting also to see how such early ideas are connected with many of my current artistic preoccupations: recurring images of eggs, sprouting trees, regenerating landscapes and unidentified animals, strangers arriving on distant shores and vulnerable creatures adopted by caring children.

I like looking at my earliest drawings because that remind me of a time before anything mattered very much. Certainly, I had a talent for visualizing objects, although I think 'talent' is often misunderstood as an innate skill. It's really more of an excitement, a special interest or attraction – the skill is just something that tries to keep up, the watering-can you reach for when you think about a garden, the backpack you reach for when you feel the urge to travel, the words conjured when you feel like talking. For me that enthusiasm has to do with grasping the 'flavour' of a thing, often a fleeting impression that exists behind the curtain of language. It's wanting to know more about the tree-ness of a tree, the bird-ness of a bird or the house-ness of a house; to not be fooled by the deceptive simplicity of words and labels.

What are these things really? What is their essence? It's such an enticing mystery, and whenever I go out sketching, I'm invariably returning to the same starting point, drawing as a toddler, a child, a teenager, a young adult. It's always the same, elusive mystery of existence. Meanings drawn tight from years of experience as an adult are pulled open to reveal what was always enigmatic: a 'tree', a 'bird', a 'house' and many more things with arbitrary, strange-sounding names.

Of course, it's very easy to frame an artist's development as somehow following a very purposeful trajectory, preordained and deeply philosophical. How far from the truth! I grew up in an environment of middle-class pop culture, about as far from the artistic centre of the world as you can get while still having access to fast food.

Suburban Western Australia in the 1980s: a land of discount supermarkets, television, advertising, regrettable fashions and embarrassing fads imported second-hand from the United States, a country we wrongly believed knew what they were doing. Like most kids, I did not really know about 'Art' and 'Literature' in terms of a hierarchy of quality; everything seemed tuned to the same buzzing frequency, radio signals from anywhere that was not here. It was actually unimaginable that something profound might come from our tiny castaway world of home, school and football.



My artistic diet included drive-in movies, videos and computer games and other electronically reproduced chaos, a precursor to the contemporary screen culture so seamlessly embraced by young people today. Naturally, my favourite subjects were robots, monsters, spaceships and disasters, and I drew these constantly.

It's funny now, when I give a talk to young kids, I show them all the work I'm doing now and they say "Oh, yeah ... I suppose *The Rabbits* is kind of interesting ... *The Red Tree* ... not bad, not bad ...". Then I show them this picture and they go, "That's Awesome!!"

It's easy to be disparaging about this now, to focus instead on my experiences of fine art and classic literature, which I also enjoyed as part of an eclectic mix. But the truth is that my life as an artist emerged from popular culture. Not because it was good or bad, but because there were some glimmers of beauty and brilliance buried in all that white noise, some interesting bits of nutrition beneath the sugar and popcorn. I just had to look critically, without even knowing what that meant. I did this by drawing the things I liked, quiet moments of meditation in which to decide the difference between good and bad.



I would often draw after coming home from a movie, using felt-tip pens on the back of old architectural plans that my Dad had set aside for me; luxuriously large pieces of paper for a child. Movie posters were quite expensive, so I was effectively creating cheap alternatives for my bedroom – and also 'improving' some of scenes and objects according to my own directorial tastes. The monster might be even better with two heads, the spaceships much longer, the hero far less confident against the giant caterpillar of my own backyard. Now that I occasionally work as a film concept designer, it's interesting to see how these childhood scribbles might be added to my resume – who would have guessed that it was all professional development!

I realise that my own book and short film, *The Lost Thing*, was subconsciously fed by the popular images of my childhood, from *Star Wars* to *ET*, and in turn may inspire a new generation of children. I have a little folder of 'lost things' sent to me by children of all ages – drawings of creatures made of suburban junk – with, of course, each child's personal modifications and improvements.

Inadvertently, they are critically interpreting my work, and also thinking about the hidden spirit locked within banal, confusing details of modern life. They are making sense of junk; in creating these 'lost things' perhaps finding deeper meanings from an otherwise shallow and commercially saturated environment.

We must accept that children today find themselves confronted by a confusing mix of reality and processed reality; this is what we have to live with. It's not necessarily bad, and humans have always been living with chaos and noise, blended truth and falsehood. Personal creativity can allow us to make sense of it: drawing, writing, looking and reading within a thoughtful, attentive space. This is how we can catch our breath, collect our thoughts, test our ideas and inevitably figure out who we are in the process. This is how we create our own personal map of the world.

And this is also why literature is so important. The best books were for me like a condensed organisation of ideas, a calm bay of interpretation in a world of noise. Reading seemed, as a child, a lot like drawing and writing; like my illustrations on old architectural plans, it was a self-mediated experience. More importantly perhaps, a self-owned experience, something that is incredibly important to children, who often live in a world where they are told what to do and think, either directly or by implication. Books offer the freedom to make up our own minds, the best stories being not at all instructive or moralizing, but rather asking very well crafted questions in an entertaining way, inspiring further creative thought.

In fact, I often think of a good story, whether written, illustrated, filmed or spoken, as really being a beautiful question. The most beautiful questions are actually a little unsettling, because at their best they have no simple answer.



My first experiences of this, as I imagine is the case for most of us, were the stories my mother read to my brother and me at bedtime. Literature had not been a big part of my mother's life, having grown up herself in a household of with few books, enduring a factory-like education that regarded literacy as a tool for work, in an environment where creativity was considered an idle distraction (a familiar world for many of us). Perhaps because of this, she was adamant that my brother and I be exposed to a great range of books. Also because of this, our bedtime readings were quite random and unfiltered, whatever was on the public library shelf and looked okay.

The most memorable of all these selections was George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The fact of it being a children's book seemed pretty obvious from the first page, and therefore appropriate for my brother and I, aged about seven and eight. We all knew as much about Soviet history as we did about the dark side of the moon; and had no idea what 'satire' meant (although I recall Mum looking it up in a dictionary at one point). In any case, that first page was the hook, and we all had to see it through to the end, revisiting the Manor Farm every evening, chapter by chapter, as it became progressively more corrupt and disturbing. Why did the pigs forget the rules that had so inspired all the animals to rebel? How were the sheep so easily brainwashed? Who had written on the wall that 'all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others'? Why was Boxer, the heroic horse, carted off to a glue-factory instead of a hospital?

Naturally, this left a big impression on me, and might explain something about the subjects that emerge, decades later, in my own illustrated stories: gun-toting rabbits, dogs that know how to burn down a house, blind reindeer and sinister bureaucracies.

Dark animal fables aside, the thing I appreciated most about this accidental bed-time reading was how *problematic* it was. It had us all thinking long after the final disturbing image of pigs pretending to be men. That was profoundly entertaining and moving; upsetting, but in a positive way.

It was also weirdly true: in the school playground, I certainly had some sense of what behaviour was pig-like, chicken-like, bovine and ovine. I also sensed that these things were far more complicated than categories of good and bad, being well-behaved or badly-behaved, and I remember we talked about this with Mum and Dad a lot. That is always a great thing, when a book does not end with the telling of a story's 'happily ever after' ending, but continues to bleed into reality. Character, motivation and circumstance – these seemed to be hard questions. Orwell was not like schoolwork, it would be impossible to score 100% if you were asked what it all meant.

The same is true of all the illustrated books that impressed me the most as a child, and which continue to do so as an adult. Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* which refuses to explain itself; Chris van Allsburg's *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick* full of narrative enigma; and a set of humorous poems written by Jack Prelutsky, illustrated by Arnold Lobel, *The Headless Horsemen Rides Tonight*, featuring zombies, ghouls and ghosts, going about their compulsive, sordid business without any hint of moral redemption. I borrowed such books from the library so often that I might as well have owned them. What they all had in common was a kind of simple confession that life is strange and funny, friendly and scary, and that meaning is something you have to find yourself, it can't be delivered like a sermon or a vaccination. It's as if the author is quietly saying to you, "What do you make of this?" and then leaving you to your own devices.

Our Mum read us many other stories which were very resolved and morally instructive, and which I now barely remember: kids doing bad things, and facing the consequences, or bravely taking responsibility. Perhaps these had some educational value, but they were as forgettable as they were didactic (and, dare I say, often implausible!). It's worth recalling here something Philip Pullman, author of the reality-bending *Dark Materials* trilogy said on this subject: "Children choose to read stories that please them, not stories that are ethically instructive. The moral teaching comes gently, and quietly, and little by little, and weighs nothing at all." (Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award recipient speech, 2005)

My short fable 'The Water Buffalo' is very much about this, without realizing it. In fact, most of my work is unconsciously self-reflexive: my characters are often seen looking, drawing, reading and writing, but rarely speaking (many of them don't even have mouths). In this case, I just loved the idea of a big, silent buffalo that lives in an empty suburban lot, similar to one I used to walk past every day on my way to the supermarket. When asked for advice, the buffalo points in a particular direction, but he never says what he is pointing at.



This is a kind of a metaphor for the work of an artist or writer. A good creative idea is little more than a hunch, an intuition that something meaningful is out there, over in the darkness beyond the houses, trees and power-lines. It can't be spoken of directly; explanation or advice won't work here. For an idea to really weave itself into the fabric of your memory, it must be experienced first-hand; you have to find your own resolution. This is what good literature offers the reader, and especially the young reader, encountering so much of this world for the first time, and children will happily respond to anything that respects their own insight, without telling them what to think.

As for the buffalo – the artist in a vacant lot – perhaps he knows what he was pointing at, and perhaps he doesn't. Sometimes it's enough to just tell a child to look carefully; the rest will take care of itself. After winning the Astrid Lindgren prize, I spent a bit of time examining books about Pippi Longstocking, trying to understand the broad appeal of this crazy character, and particularly noticed her loud proclamation that "I'm a Thing-Finder... The world is full of things, and somebody has to look for them, and that's just what a Thing-Finder does." Which prompted me to create a drawing for a Swedish museum, featuring Pippi and my own buffalo remarking considering a shared direction to some unknown destination. Artists, writers and readers are all

thing-finders: we have some sense of direction, but don't really know what's at the end of the journey.

The surrealism of my stories and pictures is partly a confession of ignorance, an acknowledgement that life is weird and mostly undiscovered. It's okay to be uncertain, puzzled and not have all the answers.

The other great confession of literature, and one that I've actually found very comforting, is that life is hard. As much as it is joyful, wonderful and astounding, it can often be depressing – people suffer, irrational things happen, fairness is far from guaranteed and disappointment is commonplace. Just admitting this openly can be immensely consoling, especially for a child, given that childhood is so emotionally tumultuous – there's a kind of relief to be found in an honest, safe and thoughtful examination of weakness, failure and fear. Here again, art and literature cast a very open eye over that basic human question: 'Do others see and feel what I see and feel?' Just asking that question ensures we are never alone, and to talk about disturbing things is inherently optimistic.

For this reason I've often found it difficult to sympathise with those who consider some of my books to be 'inappropriate' or 'too dark'. Even the word 'dark' itself misses the point considerably, as if one is dwelling on negativity rather than trying to question it in an enlightened way.

The Red Tree is the most interesting example. It's a story without any specific narrative, plot or characterization; no particular moral message, no continuity, and no clear theme, except that it's more or less about depression. All of these qualities seemed to me, oddly enough, perfectly suited to a picture book, even though they run counter to so many familiar picture book conventions. And indeed, getting an original concept published has been a challenging part of my job, given that children's publishing can be quite conservative by nature, needing to be more of a dependable commercial enterprise than a free-ranging artistic laboratory.

That said, I've been very fortunate to work with great editors, who are very considerate of my experimental ideas. In this case I explained that the concept for *The Red Tree* was partly inspired by children's artwork, which often involves quite abstract 'emotional landscapes': monsters, houses, storms, animals and plants can be seen as specific metaphors for very general feelings. This seemed to be an ideal way to approach emotional subjects I had been trying to represent for some time: depression, loneliness, anxiety and sadness – things that might find their best expression in images rather than words.



Upon publication, the book evoked mixed reactions; some people claiming it was wonderfully life-affirming, others that it was just plain depressing and inappropriate for children. It's not my duty to answer any of these opinions, because a book is just a book; autonomous object that stands or falls by itself. But I do find reader's reactions fascinating, perhaps because my own images 'say' very little, inviting personal interpretation from others.

On one page enormous fish – possibly dead, its clouded eye weeping black fluid, its mouth hanging agape – drifts weightlessly between the buildings of a street, casting a shadow over a downcast, red-headed girl. In the gutter, there is a tiny red leaf, which can actually be found in every picture of *The Red Tree*, following this sad-looking girl from page to page.

The most interesting thing is that children are the first to notice the leaf, and intuitively understand that it is important, without naming its value. It just exists, and they can find it. They rarely ask about 'meaning', and prefer to improvise their own narrative. Adults, on the other hand, can take a little longer to notice the leaf, and many never do – especially those who believe the story to be dark and depressing. These are the same people who ask me about conceptual motivation, artistic references and, perhaps most annoyingly, "Who is your intended audience?" Well, I know who *isn't* my intended audience! If a reader is so busy trying to deconstruct, analyse and categorise everything, there's no time left to experience anything.

The good readers – children, naturally, and curious, open-minded adults – just look. They invariably recognize joy, hope and inspiration, as well as their dark counterparts, grief, depression, fear and loneliness; but they also don't want to diminish their personal reading by applying such convenient labels. They prefer the gentle mystery of it, and how that mystery occupies so much of our experience in the real world, a place of darkness and light, a place we must constantly negotiate, internally as much as externally. A good reader knows that imagination is more important than knowledge and understanding.

I, personally, never really know what my own paintings and stories mean – in fact, that's how I know if they are any good! The question of meaning must remain open, carefully passed to the reader intact, like a delicate object preserved in a jar. I go to a great deal of trouble to avoid specific interpretations of my work, and over the years I've shied away from symbolism, allegory and coded references, aspiring toward something more universal, something equally appreciated by both children and adults, the literate and illiterate, and ideally people of different cultural backgrounds, from Australia, Europe, Asia, America and elsewhere.

I'm interested in characters who know little about their world, but do their best to make the most of what skills they have: the girl with a tree growing in her room, the tiny foreign exchange student with an unpronounceable name; the couple who must face absurd challenges in a faraway desert before they can be married; a family who discover another country in a secret room of their house; an immigrant who enters a new world of strange buildings and animals, unreadable language and customs.

Each character represents the reader, and we are invited to walk in their shoes as they deal with problems not much stranger than our own. Like us, they live in a place where language and wisdom can only take you so far, the rest must be imagined and re-learned, as if you are, once again, a child.

If my work has a collective theme, it's something like this: 'reality is just another strange story'. It's something we constantly narrate to ourselves through this peculiar invention of language and pictures; a project that begins in childhood and never really ends. Great books become part of our own map of experience: through reading we grasp the power and unity of our own thought and feeling. We are invited to empathise with others, to see the world from alternative angles, to wonder what it would be like to live differently, and to not feel alone when we constantly ask: "What if?"

As Astrid Lindgren wisely observed, 'Everything of any consequence that has happened in the world happened first in someone's imagination.' (Acceptance speech, Hans Christian Andersen Medal, 1958) That's a profound thought, and perhaps the source of all hope for the future, especially when we think about the challenges awaiting for those who are only now learning to look and read. Let's hope they can imagine a world in which possibility overrides impossibility, enchantment replaces disenchantment, where a curious question is more important than dogma and complacency, and then to protest loudly against all those who would have us believe otherwise, people who would prefer us to vote, worship and consume in a fog of apathy and ignorance, as if those things are normal. There's nothing normal about reality, it's just one of several thousand possible existences, as any child playing with a paintbrush would be more than happy to tell you.



Audience Questions:

I was wondering about your school days. Many of us here are educators and are wondering how to inspire students like you.

I guess the main thing is just encouragement. That is the same with everything - something as simple as saying "That's great! That's fantastic!" even if it is not quite.

The interesting thing about confidence as an artist is that it is a fiction. The belief that you can draw something is a fictional belief, until you actually start doing it. The belief drives the drawing and, before you even notice it, you've done it. Then you realise the connection between believing you can do something and doing it. So, just getting kids to be confident. I notice, when I am doing workshops with kids, that the tricky point, I think, in childhood is around 11 or 12 when kids start to become quite self-conscious and interested in technical accuracy. They lose that wonderful things that 5 and 6 year olds have where they just like dragging that paint brush around and they don't care what happens, and you are always delighted by the result. I look at work by 4 and 5 years old and it is brilliant every time - it is because they think that they can do it!

So, I think that encouragement is critical in late primary, early teenage years - that is the point that I came really close to dropping it, because it started to become hard. Art was no longer fun. I became very critical and my reach started to exceed my grasp.

When I was a child at school, a lot of the tacit encouragement came from teachers who gave me projects to do - that can be the same with any child who exhibits a talent in a particular area, just give them a project, some challenges. One teacher gave me a lump of soapstone and said "Carve that into something," and I had to figure out how to do it. That was a really great experience as I would not have thought about it otherwise. Another teacher asked me to paint all of the classroom windows with some theme, and I was often doing things like that - in the classroom or in the school library, making decorations, stuff like that.

Interestingly, it was very slight on instruction or direction. I think I thrived the most when adults just gave me some paint and paper and just said "Go for it!" Nobody standing over me saying "Maybe you should do this, maybe you should do that." And I really thank my parents for indulging my drawings of dinosaurs biting off each other's heads and spraying blood and all kinds of weird violent, obscure drawings. I know that a lot of parents get really concerned when kids start doing that, but it is a natural thing. Kids will draw works, create things that interest them, so that it feels that there is a direct connection between their interests and the work they are doing.

The times I got discouraged were the times that adults came along and said "You should be doing more works like still lifes and serious art." That is when I started to get disinclined. My parents' approach was really just 'Hands Off!' They just said "Great! Whatever you want to do." One time, I said "Dad, I want to make a guillotine," and he helped me make it!

Where do you see yourself heading? You're a young man who has achieved so much - where do you see yourself in 25 years?

Well ... I'll be retiring this year ... (laughter). I have never really had any great ambitions; in a way, any success that I have had has been accidental. I would still be doing the same work even if I had been unsuccessful, as I was for quite a number of years. I was doing a lot of books and illustrating, work that is the same quality as what I am doing now - I can't see any difference - but it was just to pay bills, and not really going anywhere.

The only thing that I know I would NOT want to be doing, is doing exactly what I am doing now. That would depress me. As long as I am doing something different, I think it would be okay. It does not have to be art work, it could be completely different; but it would bother me if I started to do, say, *The Rabbits - Part 2 - The Reckoning!* Getting into that whole thing, to believe too much in the success that has been, that people claim you have had. Whenever I get back into the studio, I feel as insecure as I did when I was 10, with a piece of paper. And every day in the studio, as anyone who does creative work would know, it does not matter what your accomplishments are, it is a struggle and a constant battle with self-criticism. Asking yourself "What are you doing?"



That is important. I have learned to trust that, trust the feeling of insecurity, of nervousness. The moment I lose that feeling, I know I am going to fail as an artist. So I feel that it is important that in 25 years, I am still as insecure, as worried about every painting that I do, because then I know that it might be a half decent painting.

As a result of your success, have you translated that into more sales of your art works?

I don't actually sell my artwork very often partly because very early on I became a freelance illustrator as a way to avoid galleries. I didn't want to make a living by selling art work. I do a lot of painting, for myself at home; I finish them and stack them against the wall. And that, for me, is an important exercise because it kind of means that there is an aspect of my creative work that is quite pure, that is pure practice. The moment that you start knowing that this painting might sell for this much money, it starts to affect the way you paint - you can't help that. Illustration is like a really pleasant middle ground, I have found, because when I started out, there were three things that I did. I did my paintings that nobody saw, I did really commercial, boring work: diagrams of fish or a microscope, or an editorial cartoon, it was "I will draw whatever you want me to draw."



Then there was in between with illustration. You can do some sort of commercial work that gets published, but had a very low profile. I really love the low profile that picture books have, so I am not sure about where it is at now - it sort of bothers me slightly. I really enjoy being marginal, because you can do a story like *The Lost Thing*, a crazy kind of playful, funny story but with all these deeper meanings buried there for readers to find, and it gets published. It kind of flies under the radar of a lot of critics, so you don't have to worry so much about what people think - it encourages a certain amount of freedom. I would like to continue doing that.

So, as for selling art, I occasionally do, but I also like to exhibit the work where possible and keep the books together as a whole, so I can exhibit it as a whole. I think I was a bit premature as a young artist, I would sell everything. As soon as I did something, I would sell it for a few hundred bucks after spending a couple of weeks on it. I sort of regretted it, after a while.

You have said that reality is only one world that we could exist in. Would you prefer to live in reality or in a more surreal, impressionist world?

I'd better think about that for a moment ... talk amongst yourselves! ... I think, both actually, trying to be clever! I think all of us think both worlds, because there is the real world of resisted reality - it has certain properties - then there is the world inside our head, where you are constantly playing with crazy ideas. One of the great skills that you have to develop as an artist is to learn to accept crazy ideas, and not censor them. So that, when I am painting or drawing and it is going really well, it's something a bit like dreaming. I am in this world and I am thinking critically about stuff that happens to me and stuff that is around - real factual things and experiences - and at the same time my mind is wandering. The great thing about drawing is that it is like one of those machines, that senses tiny variations in signals, so that the moment the mind starts to wander off track a little bit from reality, the pencil records that and you can consciously reflect on it. "Hey there's an interesting lizard coming out of the basket. I think I'll keep drawing that."

There is this funny kind of in between world, so that what you end up with on the page is ideally something that is surreal and crazy, but at the same time has elements of reality in it, like the two worlds blended together. Something that is too straight forward and real, people don't pay attention to it because it is too familiar; something that is too weird is likely to put people off. But if you can find the right balance between the real world, and that crazy, surreal world, so that it looks like an acceptable alternative reality, then suddenly it opens up the reader's mind (and I include myself as a reader) to going off on their own tangent.

A good illustration or a good story, when it has that correct balance, triggers almost a domino effect of creative thinking where, hopefully, the reader is able to overcome the restraints of logical thinking and feels free to start thinking crazy things.



It was interesting to hear your thoughts about this regimented study of Fine Art and your disdain for it. How did you resolve that, the formal study of Fine Art?

I don't have a disdain for it; it just feels that I have a complex attitude towards it. I had some skill at drawing and painting, and was really interested in it; but as a young person, it frustrated me that when I walked into an Art Gallery, I didn't understand a lot of what I was looking at. It just looked too theoretically complex. I ended up doing an Arts degree, doing a couple of majors in English Literature and Fine Arts, which I then took to an Honours degree. Part of the reason for that was to try to understand Art; I thought if I was really interested in Art, I should try to understand it better. It was very useful: learning about Art Theory and Art Criticism which, at the University of Western Australia (where I studied) was the emphasis, not so much on practice. Theory, particularly contemporary theory, Postmodernism and so on, and I became quite interested, yet it had really no bearing on my practice as a painter, interestingly. I realise now that Theory occupies a different sphere to Practice and occasionally there is an intersection, though not much. So I got to the end of my academic career and I realised that what I really wanted to be was on the other end of the spectrum, making stuff rather than thinking about where it fits into contemporary culture or some very abstract idea with -ism at the end of it. I just wanted to be painting stuff.

I think it is useful now because, when I work in my studio I kind of switch off my intellectual, academic faculties and I just focus on nailing the feeling and moving like a natural wind over the paper. But then, afterwards, I come back and switch on the intellectual, academic part of my brain that came from education, and look at how my work fits in. So it is useful that way.

I am not disdainful of it and I am sure that, if I continued in academia, I would get further and further into it. It does concern me when people confuse academic study with appreciation - they are not necessarily the same thing. They are two really great things, but they are not always the same. Sometimes, when people deconstruct my work, it really annoys me, because they have lost their ability to really enjoy something in a nameless way, in a wordless experience. I think a lot of contemporary art, that I love and it fascinates me, is bogged down in a culture of words, where writing about art has become more important than creating and appreciating art. You see this in the ascendance of certain artists over others. Their work, you can write a brilliant essay about it but it is so boring to look at! Or impenetrable. I like to create something that feels accessible, where you don't need a degree to enjoy this picture.

That is why I am attracted to children's literature as well, because it is a fully critical and intelligent audience but with none of the intellectual nonsense that can sometimes be sprayed over the top of a reading. So, I rather trust a child to criticise my work more than an academic ... nothing against La Trobe University, of course!!

Shaun Tan
